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ABSTRACT

Several working assumptions regarding black reading behavior and alternative contexts for black reading research are presented in this paper along with an attempt to seek the fundamental bases of perception, that is, reading knowledge in the folk wisdom of people. The paper also discusses the influence of cultural and environmental factors on the process of socialization and education, and creates a bridge between reading and speech communication theorists. The paper concludes that the reading program which understands the different perspectives of black culture will be able to apply theories and methods of aural or visual environments, or a combination of those environments so that the reading student is able to utilize the wisdom of his environment. (SW)

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TOWARD A CONTEXT FOR BLACK READING RESEARCH

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TOWARD A CONTEXT FOR BLACK READING RESEARCH

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The recent literature on reading is marked by a curious absence of folk wisdom handed down from pre-slavery black America to the present day. Attention to innovative techniques, which are largely the result of shifting variables in research studies, has obscured the premises upon which ability to read and the discrimination and combination of symbols into meaningful series are founded. It is the aim of this paper to present several working assumptions regarding black reading behavior. In doing so I shall try to provide alternative contexts for black reading research. Perhaps no other topic captures the imagination of contemporary educational researchers as reading because it is seen, although questionably, as the principal building block of rational thinking. Reports of poor reading scores have suggested that today's pupils are less able to combine symbols into series than their predecessors.

American social scientists have had a healthy respect for empiricism. The inclination of this paper is to outline a conception of black reading behavior growing out of the experiences and observations of several generations. What is discussed here, therefore, is an attempt to seek the fundamental bases of perception, i.e., reading knowledge in the folk wisdom of the people. Furthermore, the outline of this paper takes into consideration the influence of cultural/environmental factors on the process of socialization and education. Our abilities and skills are derived in part from the context that surrounds and informs us.

Significant influences from black cultural behavior suggest that black children's reading behavior could be linked to other verbal behaviors with positive results. While the ratiocination processes of all human beings function on the same basic principles, the environmental factors that have impact on learning situations may be radically

different from one group to another. Communicationists have found connections between black public discourse, the folk preachers particularly, and certain African orishas and the pervasiveness of Nommo. The apodeictic certainty of such a relationship as described by these social scientists is probably as applicable to reading behavior, particularly if we accept the assumption that people tend to follow through on learning by applying generally accepted practices and traditions to different situations and phenomena. In my view, two dichotomies must be investigated before we can make adequate models for teaching black children how to read. Joan Baratz' rather technical approach to how you substitute or augment language behaviors of black children fails to get at the philosophical issue of how do we go about assessing whether or not we are teaching black children to read in the manner most adaptable to black cultural behaviors. The dichotomies are (1) visual-aural perceptions and (2) collective-individual styles. What emphasis emerges dictates, or should dictate, the style of teaching most appropriate to black children. Thus, sophisticated teaching instruments, guidebooks, and various electronic equipment, video and audio, may not be the key to modifying reading behavior. In fact, the prevalence of electronic media has caused a much too heavy reliance on technology and not enough on the folk wisdom of the community. Several writers have argued that the visual-aural dichotomy represents the way blacks and whites organize the world. What they meant to do is to point out areas of perceptual emphasis brought on by environment rather than absolutes created by biological factors. Thus, the European is said to have a visual approach to phenomena, i.e., writing and reading; the African is said to have an aural approach to phenomena, i.e., speaking and hearing. Of course, the African writes and reads and the European speaks and hears, but the theorists insist that the visual-aural dichotomy is valid insofar as the dominant approaches to events and situations are concerned. The implications of this theory are numerous and exceedingly relevant regarding black reading behavior. My work has been largely in the area of verbal communication, discourse, and language, but the connection should have been made a long time ago between reading and speaking in the

black community.[1] In fact, the social sciences must begin to make the kinds of cross disciplinary connections that will inform the educational process. To do this they must develop a synthesis which will explain the systemic relationships rather than continue analysis which isolates knowledge. This paper forms a bridge, creates a context between reading and speech communication theorists. The visual-aural dichotomy says that there are ways to organize the world that relate to how we think and reason. When we talk about the visual perceptual emphasis we are talking about a reliance on lines, an emphasis on linearity, a constructionistic approach to the environment. Such emphasis on the visual suggests that the viewer of the world seeks to arrange symbolic forms according to patterns of the eye. To speak of an aural emphasis is to speak about a reliance on harmonies, cacophanies of events, multitudinous patterns, and an expressive approach to the world. The argument to be made here is that we must analyze the world view of the readers before we attempt to apply similar approaches to everyone. An evaluative instrument which can be used to isolate certain predispositions to read based upon several approaches not simply the constructionistic model must be developed. Only then is it possible to determine to what a given pupil population is more inclined to respond. Those who learn to read in spite of an approach closely related to their world views might be considered similar to Chinese who learn English without the teacher knowing how best to present lessons in the framework of Chinese thought and philosophy. Cross cultural trainers have long recognized the need to have potential overseas workers understand the world view of the people with whom they will be living and working. It is a reasonable response to cultural and environmental factors in society.

It is necessary to explore the visual-aural continuum in order to properly assess its implications for teaching black children to read. Thomas Kochman has referred to black and white perspectives as composition/performance differences.[2] Starting from Charles Keil's position that African and African derived genres such as Afro-American jazz are fundamentally performance centered whereas European music, designed for listening, is composition-centered, Kochman has seen the Western perspective as being an

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analytical process. The taking apart of an event, musical composition, or person is the sine qua non of understanding. In contrast to this view, black cultural/environmental focus is output rather than input; understanding and appreciation derive from performance.

The black cultural aesthetic is largely oral and physical, depending on performance and expression. On the other hand, the white cultural aesthetic can be said to focus on composition and form. One relates to Keil's "engendered feeling" as the other to "embodied meaning."

As a communicationist I pay quite a lot of attention to how audiences react to sources and messages in the communicative situation. Whether it is a public discourse, e.g., a black Baptist preacher or a sanctified Methodist, a drama production, or a black exploitation movie, the audience's response can reveal evidence about how the world is approached. Thus, it matters little whether the black audience is watching "Foxy Brown" or listening to Reverend C. L. Franklin do his thing, the reaction is expressive because the cultural/environmental perspective is aural and active/participative. I am not intending by this discussion to speak of dichotomies which are either/or. Certainly all blacks do not respond to phenomena the same way; neither do all whites. Furthermore, there is of necessity a complementary relationship between the visual-aural foci. But the differences in emphasis are empirically verifiable. Kochman draws the distinction this way:

> At white parties people talk. At black parties they dance. In contemporary poetry it is significant that black poetry is written to be heard, while white Western poetry is written to be read. The conception behind a black poem often intends for it to be developed, transformed, and interpreted through performance in order to achieve maximum affect. Within the black cultural aesthetic total effect is achieved when total affect is achieved. The prestige channel of communication for blacks is oral-aural. The prestige channel for Western literati is visual-mental.[3]

In an article I did on "Styling in Black Communication Behavior" the attempt was made to draw clearly the dimensions of performance and expression in an active/participative sense because deliberate oral or physical styling must be considered a part of the black

cultural/environmental perspective.[4] Even if it is no more than the elongation of vowels to indicate extremes and superlatives, verbal styling, meant to be heard and appreciated, is a significant aspect to the perspective. That the aural emphasis pervades the black cultural/environment can be corroborated by investigating blacks in communicative settings. Perhaps the black religious audience is the example most frequently given but there are other situations which elicit nearly as much verbal reaction and response.

Now that we have outlined what appears to be differences in emphasis, i.e., conceptual styles, what are the implications for teaching black children to read? This question demands considerable thought or a rethinking of how we teach children generally and black children particularly. There is a certain ethnocentric bias to the conceptual styles in most educational approaches that may result in difficulty for the student or downright conflict. Rosalie Cohen's piece on "Conceptual Styles, Culture Conflict, and Nonverbal Tests of Intelligence" in the American Anthropologist is instructive in this area.[5] She discusses conceptual styles as rule-sets for the selection and organization of sense data. Understanding that different conceptualizations can result in messages being received differently, she undertakes an examination. What she discovers are two mutually incompatible conceptual styles--relational and analytic. Showing how these two styles are developed and reinforced in shared-function and formally organized primary groups is the basic task. Each style affects its carrier's ability to deal effectively with the alternate kind of group process requirements. Furthermore, culture conflict is different from culture difference inasmuch as groups which are mutually incompatible may be said to be in conflict. On the other hand, culture difference can be present and yet culture conflict avoided.

Schools that have not explored the cultural/environmental perspectives of their students may be introducing factors of dissonance and conflict rather than creating maximum learning conditions. One of the contentions of this paper is that educational research on reading must not continue to be simple manipulations of variables that are

themselves culturally bound but rather the exploration of the underlying assumptions of cross cultural education. An old expression among my Georgia forebearers was "You can't tell much 'bout a chicken pie till you git through the crust." We have not gotten through the crust on the question of reading; we may even be looking at the wrong pie.

In evaluating the present state of the art of teaching reading to black children several observations can be made in light of the foregoing discussion. Teachers of reading to black children, like teachers of language arts, spent a considerable amount of time on composition. This is not to say that composition should be dispensed with but rather to point out the cultural bias that requires a teacher to give students knowledge about what they were already capable of doing. The emphasis on classification would seem to suggest that by knowing what a verb or noun is a student will be able to "rap" better. Of course, this is not the case, particularly when the person using the language appropriates these classifications without knowing what they are called. In the case of reading, the contemporary teacher is likely to have several pieces of sophisticated equipment that some creative researcher has designed with the help of the Ford Foundation to which he can turn to teach the kindergarten or elementary school pupils another form of composition. In preparation for this program I visited a classroom where two of my students were holding forth with eight special reading cases and about ten pieces of electronic equipment to do all kinds of fascinating things to help these pupils learn to read. One machine was designed to have a child look at a small screen and then write down the word he saw. Another machine was designed to have a child look through a binocular-like instrument with one eye closed, then the other, and to repeat the word that appeared on the screen. These instruments are products of a visually oriented perspective and probably have some value in given educational settings. However, what is needed for black children, generally, is a system designed to accommodate the particular cultural/environmental perspective which influences behavior.

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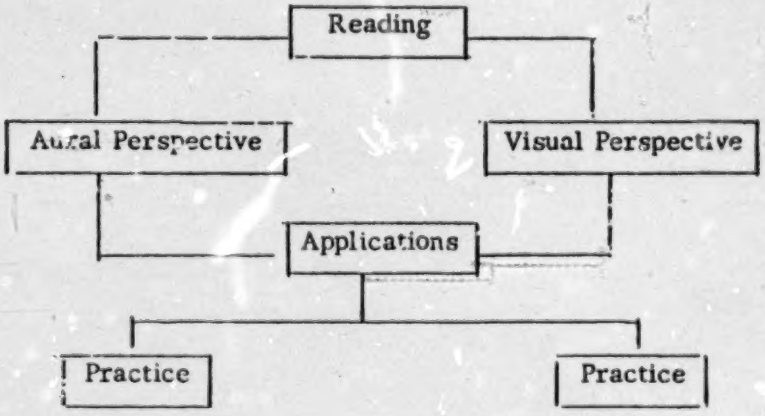
There is also a heavy reliance on individualism in the teaching of reading. A one-to-one relationship is thought to be best by the teacher who views himself as capable of handling one pupil better than he can handle two and two more effectively than he can handle three, and so on. What happens in this situation is that a pupil is given a book (likely to be multi-racial now, thanks to protest) and asked to read. The teacher or teacher-aide corrects the words, pronunciation, enunciation, etc. and the child struggles to complete the assignment. This description is an obvious exaggeration but such over-emphasis is necessary in order to highlight the problem. Pupils who have better situations for learning are those fortunate enough to have teachers who understand the black cultural/environmental perspective. Needless to say, the enchorial positions and attitudes have not made significant differences in reading scores.

What I am suggesting can be illustrated by this diagrammatical model:



The reading program which understands the different perspectives will be able to find applications of the theory and method of aural or visual environments or a combination of those environments so that in the practice of reading a pupil is able to utilize the wisdom of his environment. For example, it would appear to be highly reasonable for a black child to have a collective aural-oral reading program as well as the visual-linear program. The white child can be given the same type of program as a broadening

experience. What this accomplishes is the reduction of the dissonance for the black child who heretofore had to adjust his antennae to white cultural/environmental perspectives.

While the ideas I have given here are in rather primitive form, it should be possible for us to devise a procedure for identifying pupils who would benefit from an aural-oral perspective and then to develop the teaching techniques consonant to their needs.

FOOTNOTES

[1]See Arthur L. Smith, Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America, New York: Harper and Row, 1972.

[2]Thomas Kochman, "Cross Cultural Communication: Contrasting Perspectives, Conflicting Sensibilities," The Florida FL Reporter, (Spring/Fall 1971) pp. 3-16.

[3]Ibid., p. 15.

[4]Arthur L. Smith, "Styling in Black Communication Behavior," Encore, (Fall, 1973) pp. 15-19.

[5]Rosalie Cohen, "Conceptual Styles, Culture Conflict, and Nonverbal Tests of Intelligence," American Anthropologist, Vol. 71, No. 5 (October 1969) pp. 825-56.

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